

# The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton

## Part I – Two Kindred Hearts

About Francis and Merton. Francis as the Medieval Mendicant (one who practices begging and relies chiefly or exclusively on charitable donations to survive) and The Modern Monk. Key aspects of their life story.

## Part II – Franciscan Foundations

Drawn to the Franciscan Order by Dan Walsh's suggestions and was initially accepted. Had to wait a year before entering the novitiate, his discernment continued and his doubt overcame him. Culminated just 6 weeks before he was scheduled to enter the Franciscan novitiate, he met with Fr. Edmund in NYC to talk to the friar about what was troubling him, that resulted in Merton withdrawing his application.

The love of the Franciscan tradition settled in his heart, he joined the faculty of St Bonaventure's College to teach English. Was spiritually tumultuous time. He entered the Franciscan Third Order on February 19, 1941 and developed lifelong friendships with Friars and began to study the Franciscan Intellectual tradition in depth; in particular St. Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

## Part III – Reflections on Faith

### Chapter 5 – The "True Self": Getting to the Heart of Merton's Most Famous Insight

Pg 95 - 96: Thomas Merton offers what might be the earliest glimpse of the seed that eventually grew into his most famous insight: the True Self. Merton writes,

*What we are – our identity – is only truly known to God – not to ourselves, not to other men. The greatest terror of the particular judgement is that, the moment after our death we instantly appear before the face of God and learn our identity – truly; we finally see ourselves as we really are! The measure of our identity, of our being (the two are the same) is the amount of our love for God.*

... our real identities... are found only in finding God, because God create us, knows us, and loves us for who and what we really are... We are told in big and

little ways every day that we must construct our identities, supplement ourselves with products and services, look a certain way, speak a certain way, and be a certain way. What results from following that path is what Merton will call the “false self,” what he sometimes refers to as our “masks.”

Pg 96: James Finley has argued that “Merton’s whole spirituality, in one way or another, pivots on the question of ultimate human identity.”... “The spirituality of Thomas Merton centers upon the fact that the whole of the spiritual life finds its fulfillment in bringing our entire life into a transforming, loving communion with the ineffable God.” The life of faith and the journey of the spirit is motivated by and directed toward answering two questions for Merton: who am I and who is God?

Pg 97: Merton was indebted to “unrecognized and unappreciated” elements from various traditions, the role of the Franciscan intellectual tradition played in his thought and writing on the true self has been especially overlooked... the background and foundation of Merton’s “True Self” ... was, in many ways shaped and inspired by (John Duns) Scotus and the Franciscan tradition.

Pg 103 – 104: **Scotus and Merton’s “True Self”** – John Duns Scotus held that what made something an individual or particular thing was intrinsic or coextensive with the very being of that particular thing. This notion would eventually come to be called *haecceitas* (thisness)... For Scotus, the individual possesses a unity that is more perfect than the specific unity [of matter and form], for it excludes even the division into subjective parts... what makes something a particular person or thing is not an external characteristic or quality that is combined with or added onto a generic “humanity” or other substance to make you, me, or this or that tree... individuation is rooted in the very substance of a thing or person and not simply in its accidents (shape, color, number, etc...) ... It is the person rather than the nature that God primarily desired to create... Not only do individuals pertain to the order of God’s universe, ... but in communicating “his goodness as something befitting his beauty, in each species” he delights in producing a multiplicity of individuals... it is the individual that is primarily intended by God.”

Pg 105-106: Perhaps the most overt instance of Merton’s appropriation of Scotus’s principle of individuation, or *haecceitas*, comes to us in chapter 5 of *New Seeds*, titled “Things in Their Identity.” Not surprisingly, this is also the chapter in

which Merton first introduces his concept of the true self... "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It 'consents', so to speak, to His creative love... a tree imitates God by being a tree... That Merton talks so clearly about nonhuman aspects of creation giving glory to God by *being what they were created to be* parallels what Francis writes in his famous "The Canticle of the Creatures." In that text, Francis presents a Christian vision of the created order that recognized the rich interrelationship of all creation, which originates with God's loving and free creation of the universe.

Pg 106 - 108: From this point onward in *New Seeds*, Merton's own articulation of the principle of individuation, what he calls the True Self, comes in the form of an easily accessible paraphrasing and contextualizing of Scotus's *haecceitas*:

*No two created beings are exactly alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary, the perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself. This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and rising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.*

"Do you imagine that the individual created thing in the world are imperfect attempts at reproducing an ideal type which the Creator never quite succeeded in actualizing on earth?" ... A creature's identity, its inherent dignity or holiness, cannot be an accidental attribute... "For us [human beings], holiness is more than humanity." It is more than the substance humanity modified by the form of our particular accidental attributes.

Pg 109: Merton does not simply adopt Scotus's *haecceitas* but instead uses it as the foundation for the development of his understanding of vocation. Unlike trees, mountains, blades of grass, or animals, human beings are not simply left to be individuals in some passive sense. God delights in all of creation simply as it is, because most of creation exists as God has intended it. Human beings, however, by virtue of rationality and free will, have some say in how to live in the world. While human dignity is a foundational element of God's freely loving each particular thing into existence, human behavior and self-understanding is largely subjective. We have been given that gift as part of creation in God's image and likeness. Merton explains that this principle of individuation is the source of who

we really are but that most often men and women do not realize this. He explains. "God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real or unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours." Human beings have the challenge of being cocreators with God and ultimately discovering the meaning of our existence and our true identity in God alone. Merton puts it this way: "We are free beings and sons [and daughters] of God. This means to say what we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth."

Pg 110: "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my True Self." This sanctity, this inscape, this *haecceitas*, and this True Self are all references to that which makes us who we truly are as opposed to that which we construct or imagine ourselves to be. The context within which we focus on the false self (or "selves") is what Merton suggests is original sin. "To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being something that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be." The false self is "false" insofar as it is anything apart from the identity, the inscape, or the *haecceitas* that God created.

Pg 113-115: **Discovering Ourselves with Merton and Scotus** – Who am I and who is God? These questions stand at the core of every person's life and spiritual journey... Our True Self can only be discovered in relationship to God, so contemplation, prayer, and awareness of the Divine is the only answer... The authentic quest to discover our True Selves and to discover God, who is already always closer to us than we are to ourselves, means that we are changed by the experience.

Pg 115 – 116: The discovery of the real self is achieved (1) through death, which Merton conceives not so much as the separation of the soul from the body, but as the disappearance of the external self and the emergence of the real self, or (2) through contemplation, which is the renouncing of our "petty selves" to find "our true selves beyond ourselves in others and above all in Christ." Contemplation is

the letting go of the false self – which is why it is a kind of death, a death that takes place during life.

Chapter 6 – The General Dance: Franciscan Christology and the Christ of Thomas Merton

Pg 119-122: **John Duns Scotus on the Incarnation** – long been identified as one of the major contributors to a minority position on the reason for the Incarnation... The Christocentric thesis that if Adam had remained faithful and had not sinned, the Word would have still become incarnate... Scotus generally agrees with the position... However, his adoption of the position comes from a slightly different perspective... The first reason is that the motivation for the Incarnation can be explained apart from sin. The second reason is that divine intentionality and desire are compromised by the notion that the Incarnation was the result of human sin. In other words, the highest act of divine presence in our world could not be caused by sin... Scotus does not deny the redemptive action of the Incarnation but instead subordinates it as a secondary effect. The primary purpose, motivation and effect of the Incarnation is the predestination of all creation to glory in various orders, which requires the unity of human nature and the Word... The Incarnation was inevitable because of God's love for creation.

Pg 122 - 123: **Merton's View of the Incarnation** – Thomas Merton found this perspective extremely compelling... The last chapter of *New Seeds*, "The General Dance," is a key example of the presence of Scotus's influence in Merton's Christological thought. In the second paragraph of the chapter, Merton writes,

*The Lord made the world and made man in order that He Himself might descent into the world, that He Himself might become Man. We He regarded the world He was about to make He saw His wisdom, as a man-child, "playing in the world, playing before Him at all times." And He reflected, "My delights are to be with the children of men." The world was not made as a prison for fallen spirits rejected by God... The world was made as a temple, a paradise into which God Himself would descend to dwell familiarly with the spirits He had placed there to tend it for Him.*

... Merton asserts that the Incarnation, God's own descent into the world to live as a human person, was part of the plan of creation from the beginning.

Pg 123 – 124: Merton see in God's decision to create men and women in God's image and likeness an expression of the cosmic Christocentricity of creation as a

whole. "God creates things by seeing them in His own Logos," Merton writes of the second person of the Trinity's place in the action of creation... "The Word of God Himself was the 'firstborn of every creature.' He 'in Whom all things consist' was not only to walk with man in the breeze after noon, but would also become Man, and dwell with man as a brother." ...

*The Lord would not only love His creation as Father, but He would enter into His creation, emptying Himself, hiding Himself, as if He were not God but a creature. Why should He do this? Because He loved His creatures, and because He could not bear that His creatures should merely adore Him as distant, remote, transcendent and all powerful.*

Love holds primacy in the cosmic Christology of Merton as it similarly does in Scotus's doctrine of absolute predestination of Christ.

Pg 125:

*Christ is not simply the tip of the little finger of the Godhead, Loving in the world, easily withdrawn, never threatened, never really risking anything. God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves.*

... it is through Christ that we are able to see God as God truly is – humble, loving, forgiving, and poor. To say "Christ" is, at one and the same time, to say this is who God is and this is who we are called to be.

Pg 126: Like Bonaventure, who saw Christ as the key, the centerpiece of all reality and faith, Merton recognized the tremendous significance of Christ for him as an individual human being and member of creation, as well as for the whole human family.

*The joy that I am man! The fact, that I am a man, is a theological truth and mystery. God become man in Christ. In becoming what I am He united me to Himself and made me His epiphany, so that now I am meant to reveal Him and my very existence as true man depends on this, that by my freedom I obey His light, thus enabling Him to reveal Himself in me. And that first to see this revelation is my own self. I am His mission to myself and through myself to all men. How can I see Him or receive Him if I despise or fear what I am – man? How can I love what I am – man – if I hate man in others?*

Pg 127: All ethical consideration arises from a realization that who God is in Christ is the model for authentic human living and that revelation is only made possible by God's free and humble decision to empty God's self to become one like us out of love... "And indeed, if Christ became Man, it is because He wanted to be any man and every man. If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ."

Pg 128-129: Christ, for Merton as for Scotus, is the exemplar, model, and center of all creation. As such, Christ comes "before Adam not only because His is more perfect, has a more exalted dignity, a greater power, but also because in Him Adam is created, like everything else in heaven and on earth."

*Creation is created and sustained in Him and by Him. And when He enters into it, He will simply make clear the fact that He is already, and has always been, the center and the life and the meaning of a universe that exists only by His will... The hiddenness, the unobtrusiveness, the simplicity of Christ as Man are simply another manifestation of the simplicity, the unobtrusiveness and hiddenness of God Himself, living and acting in the world.*

Pg 129 - 130: "The Second Adam comes down to find man in the depths of confusion, in the moral chaos and disintegration into which he had been plunged by the sins of the first Adam and of all our other ancestors. Christ finds Adam, the 'human race,' like the Lost Sheep and carries him back by the way he came in his wandering from truth." ... We no longer recall who it is we really are; we have forgotten our True Self. Like the lost sheep, we are on the wrong path. In God's very living, walking, and breathing among us, we are shown who it is we are by seeing and knowing who God is. In this way, an effect of the redemption that comes through the event of the Incarnation is... that we are made new men and women.

[Chapter 7 – Paradise Consciousness: Modern Spirituality of Creation in a Franciscan Key](#)

Pg 131: Merton's awareness of the created world as it really is – deeply interconnected by the Spirit of God and foundationally interdependent in a way that humanity oftentimes chosen to ignore – seems to have emerged from within his heart and from an early age... something distinctive about the echoes found in

Merton's writing and reflection that can only be described as Franciscan in the truest and most unique way.

Pg 132-133: The spirituality of creation that is found throughout Merton's journals, letters, and other writings can be understood in terms of a threefold movement. First, Merton begins to see in a new way. This is a consciousness, an awakening, and an eye-opening new movement from the seclusion of one's human selfishness and self-centeredness toward a realization of the harmony of creation and humanity's call to become aware of that symphonic tune... Merton's awareness of creation and the way it spoke to him can be seen in his work from the outset. ... Second, in addition to a growing consciousness of the created order, Merton also understood each element of the created order as a vestige of God... Everything that exists reflects or points back to its Creator... bears the imprint (vestigum) of the God who lovingly will that aspect of the created order into existence... "God manifests himself in his creation, and everything that he has made speaks of him." ... Third, Merton's reflections on creation exhibit a recognition of what has been in recent years called a "kinship model of creation." A deeply Franciscan theological and spiritual tradition, this outlook can be traced back to Francis of Assisi himself.

Pg 137: **Merton's Paradise Consciousness** – It is not unreasonable to believe that at least some of Merton's outdoor time was spend near his father's painting sites and that patterns of light and color – from nature and from the canvas – become part of Merton's informal schooling. "When we go out." Writes his mother, "he seems conscious of everything."

Pg 138 - 139: revealed his keen awareness of God's intention that human persons discover their true self, in part, through relationship with the rest of the created order.

*... In order to know these hills, I ought to set foot upon their earth in quietness, perhaps. At least that seemed something painfully necessary at the time...*

The sense in which Merton "saw" the hills and recognized the world of the natural realm outside the technologically enable enclosure of his train car offers us a glimpse at the power of sight and how one learns to really see... this "learning to see" is the process of recognizing the sacrament of creation, within which we

human beings are participants. “Traditionally, sacrament has been defined as a visible sign that reveals and communicates grace... Yet... whether or not one finds God, the act of looking and waiting with open eyes is essential to realizing our full human potential.” ... “each event and place expanded Merton’s belief in the value of seeing and the uniqueness of each creature and acknowledging the sacredness of place.”

Pg 140 – 142: The medieval Franciscan, Bonaventure wrote about contemplation... most Christian spiritual writers used the Latin word *contemplatio*, which means “to see, to gaze, to focus” ... However, Bonaventure was deliberate in using the Latin word *speculatio* instead... which is a noun meaning “a mirror.” Bonaventure, inspired by the life and example of Francis of Assisi, understood contemplation to be about reflection... the reflection of *God in our world*... he described these instances as vestiges... Franciscan contemplation is about learning to see how God is always right before us, reflected in all aspects of creation. We need to see the world anew,... because God is always “it” and at play around us. ... God is not hiding’ God’s footprints are *everywhere*.... We need to let our relationship with God transform us to see the whole world in new and life-giving ways.... To talk about Merton’s increasing awareness of the nature world, his growing concern about environmental crises, and his developing paradise consciousness is to talk about his standing up straight to see the true light of God in the world around him.

Pg 142-143: **Discovering the “Footprints” of God in Creation** – “This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in His creatures” ... “looking into this world of birds” let him to feel close to God.

*The warblers are coming through now. ... seeing this beautiful thing which people do not usually see, looking into this world of birds, which is not concerned with us or with our problems. I felt very closer to God or felt religious awe anyway. Watching those birds was as food for meditations or as mystical reading. Perhaps better.... I found a bird in the woods yesterday on the feast of St. Francis. Those things say so much more than words Mark was saying, “The birds don’t know they have names.” Watching them I thought: who cares what they are called? But do I have the courage not to*

*care?... No name and no word to identify the beauty and reality of those birds today, is the gift of God to me in letting me see them.*

Pg 146-147: **The Kinship of All Creation** – Among the many contributions the Franciscan tradition has made to theological reflection on creation, the most significant is perhaps the concept of the kinship of all creation... a good way to understand Francis's experience of creation was as a "nature mystic."

*A nature mystic is one whose mystical experiences involve an appreciation of creation as God's handiwork; nature manifests the divine. Francis' nature mysticism included a consciousness of God with the appropriate religious attitudes of awe and gratitude... With a disarming sense of immediacy, he felt himself part of the family of creation.*

Pg 151: As Merton's paradise consciousness grew and his awareness of the vestiges of God in creation became clearer, there was also the dawning realization of his deeply ingrained relationship to the rest of creation. As with the Franciscan notion of "vestige", the term "kinship" is used less frequently than it is implied in the writings of Merton.

*In the afternoon, lots of pretty little myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them. I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being?*

Pg 152-153: Merton came to realize more and more, particularly later in his life when he moved into the hermitage full time, that his place in the created order – and by extension the place of all women and men – only made sense according to the radical Christian conviction that we are interconnected and interdependent on the most fundamental levels. From the beginning, God did not create separate castes within the natural world... Merton would never deny that human beings were special in some ways, including in terms of moral agency and the ability to choose between entering into and forsaking a relationship with one another... "How absolutely true, and how central a truth, that we are purely and simply part of nature, though we are the part which recognizes God" ... Merton became acutely aware of what Francis of Assisi intuited nearly eight centuries earlier in his

“The Canticle of the Creatures,” namely that humanity is not the only aspect of creation that is capable of praising God...

*But now I am under the sky, away from all the noise. The birds are all silent now except some quiet bluebirds. The frogs have begun singing their pleasure in all the waters and in the warm green places where the sunshine is wonderful. Praise Christ, all you living creatures. For Him you and I were created. With every breath we love Him. My psalms fulfill your dim, unconscious song. O brothers in this wood.*

Pg 153 – 155: Furthermore, the kinship model of creation operative in Merton’s spirituality informed his ethical outlook as much as anything else.... the trees have a natural right to exist and to be recognized as inherently valuable. ... the idea of “ecological conscience” ... adopted by Merton:

Leopold brought into clear focus one of the most important moral discoveries of our time. This can be called the *ecological conscience*. The ecological conscience is centered in the awareness of *man’s true place as a dependent member of the biotic community*. Man must become fully aware of his *dependence* on a balance which he is not only free to destroy but which he has already begun to destroy. He must recognize his obligations toward the other members of that vital community. And incidentally, since he tends to destroy nature in his frantic efforts to exterminate other members of his own species, it would not hurt if he had a little more respect for human life too. The respect for life, the affirmation of all life, is basic to the ecological conscience. In the words of Albert Schweitzer: “*A man is ethical only when life as such is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as well as that of his fellow man.*”

Merton’s paradise consciousness, awareness of God’s created vestiges, and celebration of humanity’s kinship with all of creation bear a remarkable resemblance to and are, in part, indebted to the Franciscan spiritual and theological tradition.

## Part IV – Engaging the World

### Chapter 8 – Seeing the World as It Really Is: Prophecy at the Heart of the Christian Vocation

Items for particular consideration:

- The Prophetic Vocation
- Thomas Merton's Prophetic Legacy
- The Need for Prophets in Our Own Day

Chapter 9 – No Longer Strangers: Thomas Merton and Franciscan Interreligious Dialogue  
The foundation of Franciscan interreligious dialogue and how Merton adopted them:

1. The radical adhering to the evangelical value of solidarity
2. The preferential option for the discovery of common faith
3. The position of minority rooted in a commitment to lifelong conversion

### Chapter 10 – Becoming Instruments of Peace: How Francis and Merton Challenge Us to Live Today

Francis sought to live in darkness, offer a sign of faith for those in doubt, bring joy to the sad, console the grieving, understand the misunderstood, and love the unloved. In a phrase, Francis really did pray with his whole life, in word and in deed, to become an instrument of peace.

Francis of Assisi: Poverty, Power and Peacemaking – With Francis, there is less of a merely visible break with the world; at the heart of his life there is instead more intransigence toward any compromise with the world and its powers... Francis desired that nothing should get in the way of one's ability to embrace and relate to others, just as Christ allowed nothing to get in the way of his embrace and relationality to others. The embrace of evangelical poverty that is tied to renouncing power after the model God laid out for humanity in the Incarnation is the foundation for peacemaking. For Francis, peacemaking was, plain and simple, to live as God intended human beings to live among one another within the broader context of the created universe.

Thomas Merton: Becoming an Instrument of Peace – Through his correspondence with women and men involved in the antiwar, civil rights, and peace movements,

Merton came to a clearer sense of the obligation he had as a Christian to speak out against the injustices in his time... his focus on peacemaking and its central place in the Christian life did not happen overnight... something led to a break from the singular focus on the interior spiritual life toward the praxis of Christian *living*. ... One can sense in Merton's words an outlook that bears some similarity to that of Francis of Assisi. Nonviolence and peacemaking for Merton includes – or, perhaps, is built upon – our willingness to “sacrifice and restrain our own instinct for violence and aggressiveness in our relations with other people.” ... nonviolence and peacemaking mean nothing if we continue to put up barriers between us and others, between people who are called by the Creator to be in humble, honest and direct relationship. Violence is always an instance of breaking relationship with another. For Merton, nonviolence was an integrative dimension of Christian discipleship.

#### [Conclusion – Finding Francis in Unlikely Places](#)

That Thomas Merton had a Franciscan heart seemed an odd claim to make about the most famous Trappist monk of the last century. Yet... the continued influence of the Franciscan tradition indelibly shaped the worldview of Merton.

From the earliest days of his religious conversion, Merton was drawn to a way of life that seemed to align naturally with his disposition and interests.

Perhaps more than the theological and philosophical aspects of Merton's writing, it is the spiritual and prayerful dimensions of his thought and reflection guided by the Franciscan tradition that might speak to the hearts of women and men today.

Merton's Prayer to St Francis of Assisi...